SOMETHING OLD - SOMETHING NEW

October 27, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"No one puts new wine in old wineskins; if he does the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost..." -- Mark 2:22 (RSV)

Scripture
Isaiah 43:14-21
Mark 2:18-22

Do you remember the marvelous moment in "Fiddler on the Roof" when Lev Tevye sings -- "Tradition, tradition: who, day and night, must scramble for a living? Feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers? And who has the right as master of the house, to have the final word at home? The papa... Tradition... Who must know the way to make a proper home, a quiet home, a kosher home? Who must raise a family and run the home so papa's free to read the Holy Book? The mama... Tradition."

Tevye has his problems with the impulse to change the traditions around which his life is organized.

Institutions resist change. So do people. My father was a railroader and a teller of good stories. One of my favorites was about the fireman with whom he worked and who, everyday at noon, opened his lunch pail and complained about its contents...everyday it was the same thing, a bologna sandwich...he didn't even like bologna, hated its look and smell and taste. One day my father, or so the story went, gently suggested that he might speak with his wife about this matter and tell her his feelings about bologna sandwiches. Whereupon the fireman became indignant: told my father to mind his own business. He wasn't married...had been making his own lunches for years.

People resist change. So do institutions. Tradition becomes entrenched. People organize their behavior on the basis of customs long after the original reason has been forgotten. Sometimes people die for the traditions without ever raising the issue of their viability, their appropriateness. And in every age, to ask the question, to raise the issue, to press the human community to move beyond its traditions is to engage in very risky business.

A columnist wrote recently in The New Yorker: "I'm becoming convinced that change is obviously the most basic dynamic in our universe. Kant talks about time and space as pre-existing categories...and I'd consider change in that same light. That's obvious. What's not so understandable is how much intellectual energy we waste by trying to avoid the fact." (Artist Robert Irwin in The New Yorker, 9/30/85, p.28)

In the fourth decade of the first century of the first millennium of our era there were living a people of tradition at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

They believed that their existence in that time was attributable to their tenacious hold on their traditions. As their political existence as a people became more and more fragile, their hold on their traditions became more determined, unyielding, unchanging. One of them, one who loved the traditions, challenged that dynamic. He taught that the most important tradition, the most elemental organizing principle was the love of the living God who had called them into being, led them out of captivity and given them their land. And when he had the audacity to invoke that living God's love to challenge the desperate hold his people exerted on the tradition, he found himself criticized, villified, despised, arrested, and executed. That is the theme of the first accounting of his life to have been written, the Gospel according to Mark. A record of mounting conflict between Jesus and the guardians of cultural and religious tradition which results in his crucifixion. The theme is as relevant as today's newspaper.

The Law of Moses prescribed fasting on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement. In Jesus's day the tradition was for the very pious to fast much more frequently than that. In fact, the most devout were fasting twice a week. Among the more rigorous fasters were the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. One day, one of them raised a question: "Why are the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist fasting, Jesus, but your disciples are not?" On another occasion they would ask him why his disciples ate with unwashed hands, why he broke bread with sinners, why they flouted the Sabbath customs. All of it is variation on a very familiar theme: "By what right, or what authority, do you question and break the tradition?"

That is the situation to which Jesus addressed three marvelous little parables:

- People don't fast when the bridegroom is present.

- It is not a good idea to patch an old garment with a piece of new cloth.

- You don't pour new wine into old wineskins.

The first of those parables tells us a lot about Jesus's own religious style. The sense of it is that religious tradition had become grim, determined, joyless obligation. Jesus suggested that God's love for his people is a very happy phenomenon: that if you know how good the news is, your religious observances are going to look and feel like a party, a real celebration, something of what those who were privileged to be in this sanctuary last Sunday night experienced when the Apostolic Church of God Choir presented its concert.

In the second and third parables, Jesus said something very provocative about the new and the old, about new truth confronting traditional customs.

These are homey vignettes. He had watched his mother patching his own garments. She had told him that if you want to patch a hole in an old and venerable pair of britches, you must use old cloth. If new material is used, it will shrink when the garment is washed, and the original tear will be bigger.

He had seen how wine was stored. The fermentation process continued after the wine was declared suitable. One of the products of that process is gas. If you put new wine into containers that are not elastic, the pressure will cause them to break. One can almost imagine the childhood excitement when a wineskin exploded at an inopportune moment. New wine is placed in new skins. Old wine is kept in old skins.

Jesus was telling his people that their traditions had become too important. The wineskins, after all, exist for the sake of the wine. The wine is what you want to preserve and protect. In religion, it is God: God's love and will, God's truth and God's moral imperatives that matter, not the particular forms in which people respond to and express themselves on the subject. The Pharisees in the first century had forgotten that. The customs and rituals and traditions of religion had become more important than the will of God. Religion had become an end in itself.

The word of God here is clear. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is dynamic, alive. It cannot and will not be contained in anybody's favorite customs and traditions. The Gospel transcends the very religious forms it inspires: it measures and judges the structure and traditions people devise to express it. Therefore, the Gospel is always slightly at war with institutional religion, for it is the very nature of institutions to want to nail down once and for all that which cannot be nailed down permanently. The Gospel judges us when our loyalty to Protestantism or Catholicism or Presbyterianism or Lutheranism becomes more important to us than our loyalty to Jesus Christ. Jesus becomes judge when our commitment to the forms, the traditions, becomes synonymous with or a substitute for our commitment to him.

This is Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517 an Augustinian Friar by the name of Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany, and in the process of starting the Reformation, reminded the whole church that the truth it celebrates is bigger than its institutional expression: that the church is charged to express that truth in ways which are relevant in each new age: that the church is inclined to confuse the wine with the wineskin, and to make itself, its traditions, the object of its veneration and adoration. The spirit of the Reformation is reformation, a dynamic principle which suggests that God's people in every age are responsible for re-forming the church.

Once that principle got loose on the world, once both Prestant and Catholic cultures began to feel the effect of God's liberating, recreating love, the impact was enormous. Even secular historians tip their hats to the lively periods known as Reformation and Counter Reformation. Professor Jaroslav Palikan of Yale University, in a new book on the subject of Jesus's impact on the history of cultures, notes:

> "The Reformation enriched all areas of culture...literature, art and music -- and on the other hand...the political order." (Jesus Through the Centuries, P150)

Western culture and western civilization were profoundly changed by the Reformation: art, literature, language, education, economics and political philosophy -- all were reformed and reshaped once the old traditions were challenged.

Part of the word here is that the lively Gospel of God will be in tension with the traditions of the culture. In Calvin's Geneva, centuries of tradition were overturned in the political arena and the results included public education, child labor laws and a dynamic and revolutionary rationale for representative rule. By challenging old traditions of power and privilege, rank and status, the Gospel -- through the incisive logic of John Calvin -- would stimulate the development of new ideas -- and a new system -- called republican democracy.

Several centuries later the Gospel began to challenge traditional ways of thinking about slavery, about the roles of men and women, and today much of the persistent ferment for new ways of thinking about human rights, hunger, peace are coming at the insistence of people who know something of the lively power of the Gospel.

The world needs that, and we who are the stewards of the Gospel need to remember that it is the nature of the Gospel, even though it is always an irritant. Roman Catholic theologian Matthew Fox observes: "The capitalist-socialist debate pales before the survival issues that the global village faces today, and heated rhetoric from either camp only makes the situation less open to creative solution...a new kind of economics and a new kind of social linkage are necessary." (A Spirituality Called Compassion, P179)

The political leaders of the world gathered in New York this week to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the founding of the U.N. The fact that the celebration took place: that heads of state, who in their respective capitals plot one another's demise, sat down together, broke bread, and talked, is cause for hope. The sobering reality is the traditions of nationalism, racism, pride, imperialism: the tradition of war which has been expressed 130 times since 1945, and the 16 million people who have died because the human tradition of solving problems by force is stronger than any other tradition.

With customary directness Norman Cousins notes that our number one problem in the world is that the richest, most powerful nations are using most of their resources preparing to destroy one another. Our number two problem is that our best minds aren't working on our number one problem.

The Gospel is new wine. The hardened, brittle traditions of religion and culture could not contain it. It found -- it created -- new forms, new religious traditions, new cultures. And yet it is an oversimplification to characterize Jesus as an iconoclast. He was not the enemy of all tradition. There is no evidence that it ever occured to him to withdraw from the Judaic tradition into which he was born. In Luke's version of our text there is an intriguing additional sentence. In addition to the warning about the new wine and old skins, Luke reports Jesus saying: "No one after drinking old wine desires new: for he says, 'the old is good'." That sheds a whole new light on the matter. Some scholars suggest that by the time Luke got around to writing his Gospel, three or four decades after Mark, the Christian community already had developed its own traditions, and the Gospel was already fermenting, disturbing, causing conflict. Luke, the argument goes, added this statement to soothe the early Christian traditionalists. I prefer to assume

Jesus said it. You don't put new wine in old skins. But that fact doesn't alter another fact which everybody knows, namely that old wine is superior to new wine. Just because the old containers have lost elasticity doesn't mean they are worthless. In fact, then their purpose is important. They are what you store old wine in until you need it for an important occasion.

The opposite of a culture imprisoned in its own tradition is one floating around loose, with no roots. In one of his delightful essays, the late E. B. White, who died just a few weeks ago, discusses the relative merits of the wood stove and the electric range in his Maine farmhouse. He writes: "Many of the commonest assumptions, it seems to me, are arbitrary ones: that the new is better than the old, the untried superior to the tried, the complex more advantageous than the simple, the fast quicker than the slow, the big greater than the small, and the world as remodeled by Man the Architect functionally sounder and more agreeable than the world as it was before he changed everything to suit his vogues and conniptions...if we had to decide... we would choose the wood stove...because of the quality of its heat, the scope of its talents, the warmth of its nature. (It can dry sneakers, warm the dog, and it makes a companionable sound on cold mornings)." (Essays of E. B. White, Coon Tree, p.40)

Jesus was no simple revolutionary. The opposite of a religion entrapped in its own rituals and traditions is one which acknowledges no past, celebrates no history and therefore has no more vitality than a bunch of cut flowers -- colorful, flashy, short term. Sociologists worry that a generation obsessed with instant gratification will forget that humanity does continue to learn down through the generations, that truth is sometimes handed from one to the next. Jesus did not advise discarding the old wineskins. He did not deny his own history. He simply taught that the containers sometimes become more important than what they contain.

On Reformation Sunday, 1985, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the Christian church is in the middle of a very critical period. A barrage of media articles and documentaries point to the decline of what was once "Mainline Protestantism" and the vigor of new religious organizations, the phenomenon of the electric church, and the continuing secularization of the culture itself. In the middle of that, the human propensity is to hold on to the past for dear life, and in the process to allow the wineskin to replace the new wine of the Gospel.

Someone characterized the church as an institution "driving blindly into the future with its eyes locked on the rear view mirror." Martin Marty once quipped that "The Seven Last Words of the Church" will be -- 'We never did it that way before!" Elsewhere Marty wrote: "I believe this thesis to be defensible, that ordinarily Christian people produce institutional forms in each century which are well adapted to the needs and occasions of the last century." (What's Ahead for the Church, p.11)

The result is that fewer and fewer people expect the church to be relevant. Religion is regarded as antiquarian, curator of the customs of the past, having no connection with the daily activity, the struggling and working and playing and laughing and weeping and loving that constitute life for

most of us. Churches become museums in this world, not just because hostile governments make them into museums but because nothing that goes on in them has to do with what is going on outside them.

The church cannot afford to look back. A new and sometimes frightening world requires a faith big enough and secure enough to be fresh, innovative, relevant - to ask the embarrassing questions, to be a fly in the ointment, to challenge the status quo to defend itself -- without denying the validity and nobility of its past. We deny our Lord and we miss the power of the Gospel to change the world, and to change us, when we insist that the wineskins are sacred, that our way is the once-and-for-all-way, that whatever else changes around us, we will not.

As I prepared this sermon I kept recalling the words of a fine old hymn. I looked up the poem upon which it is based; This Present Crisis, James Russell Lowell, 1844. Lowell felt like his world was coming apart...he wrote:

> "New occasions teach new duties;
> Time makes ancient good uncouth.
> They must upward still, and onward, who
> would keep abreast of truth;
> Lo, before us gleam her campfires! We
> ourselves must Pilgrims be,
> Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly
> through the desperate winter sea,
> Nor attempt the Future's portal with the
> Past's blood rusted key."
>
> (Complete Poetical Works, James Russell Lowell, pp. 67-68)

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins..." The word here comes personally too. In a sense it is easier to read it and hear it and preach it corporately. But it addresses the soul of the individual as well as the soul of the church. The word is for you and for me. It is, as always, judgment but also grace. It is, as always, the stirring challenge of the Lord Christ to let go of a past that needs to be discarded, and to cast one's life, one's hopes and dreams and aspirations, one's future on him and his Kingdom. It is also, as always, the graceful bidding to find our security in him instead of customs, behavior patterns traditions which have outlived their relevance and their usefulness to us.

The word here is that God is ready to do new things with your life: that you and I need to be prepared to be changed as individuals in relationship to this Christ. The word here is that we do not have to be limited by past structures, by traditional patterns of behavior. The propensity of the Gospel is to do, in our lives, precisely what Jesus did in the life of his culture: challenge, confront, change. You and I can become new.

In Jesus Christ, God is willing to forgive what is past: to free us from the dead weight of guilt. In Christ, God will make all things new -- will give us strength to be free of the dead weight of inertia, the patterns, the ideas, the traditions which have become inflexible in our most personal lives.

Who among us doesn't need that? Who among us hasn't accumulated personal traditions which have become petrified and inflexible? Who among us does not need the liberating, graceful power of Christ to start something anew, to begin afresh, to strike out on some new and noble venture?

In Jesus Christ, God has called us. The call is an invitation to follow: to think new thoughts, to walk new roads, to become a new person. The promise is that into the old facade of our lives God will pour something new and exciting and fresh. It is called our salvation.

Amen